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ABSTRACT

Since its inception the Children's Advertising Review Unit has turned to research in order to better evaluate children's advertisements, to develop guidelines for children's advertisers and to resolve some perplexing questions about certain types of advertising content. Although some work has been done in advertising directed toward children, most of this research does not meet the needs of the Children's Advertising Review. What is needed is research on how children perceive certain fantasy elements in advertising, and animated presentations as opposed to those which utilize live action photography; how various styles of presenters influence children's perceptions of the products advertised and how children perceive certain forms of presentation in food and toy advertisements and "disclaimers" and "disclosures" which are presently included in commercials because of existing code and guideline requirements. There is also a need for research on research to find a trustworthy methodology. (MS)

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"Policy Implications of Advertising to Children"
Remarks to the Annual Meeting
American Psychological Association
Washington, D. C., September 5, 1976

I am pleased to be in the company of psychologists and researchers, because I feel you are the people best placed to shed some light on many puzzling policy questions regarding children and advertising.

In the two years since the Children's Advertising Review Unit was set up within the National Advertising Division of the Council of Better Business Bureaus, we have turned again and again to research:

--To help us in evaluating children's advertisements,

--To help us in developing guidelines for children's advertisers,

--To help resolve some perplexing questions which we and others have raised about certain types of advertising content.

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When the Unit began we set up a committee of seven academic advisors. Five of them are members of this Association. One is a nutritional anthropologist, one a professor of marketing whose work has been concentrated in the study of advertising's effects on children and adolescents. With the guidance of this committee we have reviewed much of the published research and attempted to find out where it might suggest policy change. We have amended our Children's Advertising Guidelines and published them, just over a year

ago, with the support of industry, and with the understanding that they would be subject to further modification as new information became available.

I would like to take special note of a paper reviewing the literature on children's perceptions of premium advertising which was done for us by Daniel Wackman and Ellen Wartella, and which contributed to our guideline on premium offers in children's advertising.

Also, the advice of our committee suggested certain investigations of particular advertisements. I should mention that as of July 31st, the Children's Unit has handled forty-eight investigations of children's advertisements. Of those, thrity-eight have been either modified or discontinued; six were substantiated; four were closed administratively. None of these cases was appealed to the National Advertising Review Board.

For those of you who find this last statement somewhat mystifying, I should explain that our efforts are part of an on-going mechanism of advertising self-regulation, which consists of two parts. The National Advertising Division conducts investigations of national advertising, and tries to bring about modification or discontinuance of any misleading content. Its decisions may then be appealed to the National Advertising Review Board, which does from time to time overturn NAD's decisions. The whole mechanism is patterned after a legal one, and although we have no formal enforcement powers, the degree of cooperation from advertisers is very encouraging. In its first five years, more than a thousand matters have been settled without recourse to government action, and especially in the case of children's advertising, we are pleased that none of our investigations since 1974 has yet been taken before NARB.

In some of these investigations, behavioral research was used by us in support of the viewpoints which we held. In others, comprehension testing with children was submitted by the advertisers in support of their own positions. We have recently conducted some group session research with children on particular ads which we regarded as doubtful. So you can see that our effort is already very reliant upon research. And I hope it will become more so, because I see in research the opportunity to reduce the distance between opposing camps of opinion about the effects of advertising upon children.

Research does not resolve questions. And of course, any one study is always subject to the critical evaluation of other researchers, who call into question the size and selection criteria of the sample, the manner of the questioning and so forth. We know that for these reasons we can't expect ultimate wisdom from research efforts. All the same, some knowledge is enlightening and influential. And, as studies are replicated, and directions begin to emerge, I think all groups will benefit. Surely it makes sense to base regulations on studies of how children perceive advertisements. We are doing that on as large a scale as our funds will permit. We are trying to influence others to fund useful research which is too costly for us. And I am pleased that some of our thoughts about research are apparently being taken into account by the National Science Foundation in their granting of awards for research projects on children and television advertising.

I am now assuming that most of you are aware of the published studies on advertising and children. Dr. Wells, Dr. Robertson and Dr. Wackman have all contributed significantly, and their names appear quite a lot in the biblio-

graphy which we have put together for our own use.

We have made an effort to review most of these findings. And I hope you will not misunderstand me when I say that much of this very good work is not very useful to us in the work we do.

One reason for this is that the intent of that work was to determine whether children are influenced by advertising, how children develop mechanisms to cope with advertising, how children process the information which they receive, and so forth.

Our needs are somewhat different. More specific perhaps. Our work can benefit most from specific studies of various forms of advertising content directed to children. We need to know more about such questions as:

--How children perceive certain fantasy elements in advertising

--How children perceive animated presentations as opposed to those which utilize live-action photography

--How various styles of presenters influence children's perceptions of the products advertised

--How children perceive certain forms of presentation in food and toy advertisements

--How children perceive many common "disclaimers" and "disclosures" which are presently included in commercials because of existing code and guideline requirements.

Now let me tell you about a small study which has been done by a group of researchers, all from Stony Brook, under the aegis of the Brookdale Institute.

This small study, of 140 children in two age groups, sets out to examine children's perceptions of advertisements for products which have to be assembled

in order to be used.

What made this project especially attractive to us was that we felt it could lead us readily to some practical recommendations for advertisers. We intend to share the report with major children's advertisers, and copies of the report will also be sent to Senator Frank Moss, to whom the research was initially proposed. In due course we would be pleased to distribute copies of this research to those of you who are interested.

Now let me suggest to you another research direction which I think would be very productive.

Dr. Wells has called it "research on research." Very simply, there's not a good deal of confidence among some researchers about the validity of research findings with younger children.

A feeling seems to exist that the general agreeability of younger children makes their responses hard to rely on. There's some concern about data gathered with mothers observing. Industry policy-makers are unwilling to be guided by data from young children even in their own realm: decisions of what kinds of products and advertising to put into the marketplace.

For this reason, experiments to find a trustworthy methodology... will be of more than academic interest. I don't believe that any research with younger children can fully resolve the difficult question of the pre-school viewer. The reason for this is simply that few advertisers are willing to develop all their advertising...to older children, adolescents,

and adults... according to the developmental requirements of the very youngest child.

But with the state of the art as it is today... it's close to impossible to come to grips with the subject at all. And for this reason I think very basic exploratory work with younger children could be very useful.

In order to make the research most useful, there is a definite need for better communications between the research community and the advertising community.

Because of this, we have already organized two seminars to permit some face to face discussion between children's advertisers and our own committee of academic researchers.

A report of the second seminar, held this summer, is available and I would be happy to share it with you.

In the report you will find a passing reference to a phrase coined by Raymond Bauer of Harvard: "The Dialogue that Never Happens."

In his book, co-authored with Stephen Greyser, entitled Advertising in America: The Consumer View, Dr. Bauer developed his thought that the spokesmen of government and of business hold such different models of the universe, that when they attempt to communicate, they "talk past each other."

In our modest way, I think we in the Children's Advertising Review Unit have begunto encourage a real dialogue. Unbiased research approaches will assist the dialogue still further, and will help to bring about meaningful policy change in behalf of children.

We hope your research interests will lie close to ours, and would like to be helpful to you in any way that we can.